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American Library Association

PUBLISHING BOARD

LIBRARY TRACT, No. 3

B 886,443

TRAVELING LIBRARIES

BY

FRANK A. HUTCHINS

Secretary Wisconsin Free Library Commission

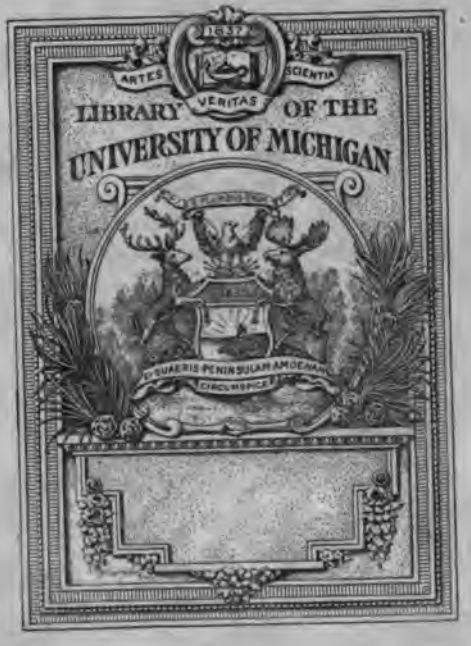
PUBLISHED FOR THE

American Library Association

BY

HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN & COMPANY, BOSTON

1902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TRAVELING LIBRARIES*

BY F. A. HUTCHINS,

Secretary Wisconsin Free Library Commission, Madison, Wis.

For some years careful students of the library movement in the United States have felt confident that every resident of a city would soon have good library privileges without fee. The rivalry of cities, the growing belief in the necessity of free libraries in our general system of education, and the feeling that public libraries are the most enduring monuments are uniting to secure for such libraries great private and public gifts. Until seven years ago, however, there was no systematic and continued effort to give free access to collections of good books to farmers and the residents of small villages. The almost universal lack of library privileges in rural communities has not arisen so much from failure to appreciate books as from certain practical difficulties in the methods of supplying them. The writer has visited scores of small communities, in a state which may fairly be regarded as typical, and has found very few in which public libraries have not at some time been started. Less than two per cent., possibly not one per cent., of those established before 1893 have been permanently successful. While nearly all of them did some good during the first year or two of their existence, the waste of money, effort, and enthusiasm involved in their failures is appalling.

The reasons for their failures are uniform and easily understood. They resulted from the following causes: —

1. Uninteresting books. The books of the first purchase were usually books of good reputation which the average

[1] Prepared in October, 1899.

reader did not care for. The historical works generally included the volumes of Gibbon, Macaulay, Hume, and Bancroft, and others as formidable.

2. Infrequent supplies of new books. In most cases all the money raised from fees, subscriptions, or entertainments was used in the first purchase of books, and when each patron had read the few volumes that interested him he went no more to the library.

Wherever suitable volumes were bought and new books were frequently supplied, the libraries flourished as vigorously in the country as in the city. It was evident then that if some plan could be devised to give country people books selected by educated buyers, and to give them fresh books at frequent intervals, the problem of giving farmers successful libraries would be solved, but no practical solution was suggested until 1892. In that year Mr. Melvil Dewey, librarian of the State Library in New York, secured from the legislature of that State an appropriation to inaugurate a new system of library extension, which was so simple, practical, and economical that it was immediately successful, and has since been followed in two thirds of the States of the Union. With the money appropriated Mr. Dewey bought a number of small libraries of one hundred volumes each. Stations for them were made in villages, in schools, and in connection with university extension centres and study clubs. A library was sent to a station to remain six months, and at the end of that period it was returned to Albany, to be sent out to another station. These itinerant collections of books soon became known as "traveling libraries."

To secure the preservation and safe return of the books Mr. Dewey demanded certain pledges. In communities having no public library or accredited school he required a guaranty signed by twenty-five tax-payers. Each library was sent out in a chest. With it went a library case, a charging outfit and a number of small, printed, annotated

catalogs. The library was managed, as far as practicable, like a good small public library. The main purpose was to show people how greatly a library may benefit a community, and to create a desire for a local library. From the larger communities Mr. Dewey asked pledges that efforts would soon be made to establish permanent libraries.

The work in New York has been steadily growing, and in 1898 the State Library in Albany sent out 534 traveling libraries. There are now libraries for special students and study classes in many branches of literature, science, and art, as well as for the general reader. Lantern slides and pictures are sent under conditions similar to those made for books. A uniform fee of five dollars is charged for the use of a library of one hundred volumes. Smaller fees are charged for smaller libraries. Despite the fee the local managers must make the library free and accessible to all residents of the community.

In 1895 the legislatures of Michigan and Iowa made appropriations for traveling libraries to be purchased and managed by the librarians of the state libraries. In Michigan an annual appropriation of $2500 was made. In Iowa the annual appropriation is $2000.

In the former State the system was successful from the start. In Iowa it has been equally successful since Mr. Johnson Brigham became state librarian in 1898. Mr. Brigham's experience, however, has convinced him that the traveling libraries would be more successful in securing the establishment of permanent local libraries and in cultivating the "library spirit" in all parts of the State if they were under the charge of a state library commission, of which the state librarian should be a member.

In 1896 the State Library of Ohio was placed under the charge of a State Library Commission, which was given authority to use such volumes as could be spared to make traveling libraries. These smaller libraries are made up to suit the needs of the special organizations sending for them,

and when returned the books are merged in the general library. While this plan has some advantages, it practically prevents the publication of small, printed, annotated catalogs such as are furnished with the traveling libraries in other States. In New York as many as ten libraries are sometimes made up similar in all respects, and this makes the cost of selecting, classifying, annotating, and printing for each one a comparatively small expense.

The experiment in Ohio was so successful that the legislature has recently voted an annual appropriation of $4000 for traveling libraries.

In 1899 the legislature of Minnesota established a State Library Commission and gave it $5000 annually for two years to pay for books for traveling libraries and to provide for their purchase, arrangement, and circulation. "The formation of permanent libraries and the better organization of those now in existence will be the chief aim of the commission in all its plans."

In the same year a library commission was established in Maine, and the legislature appropriated $2500 for its use in buying traveling libraries. Fifteen hundred dollars of this amount is available now and the remainder will be given in 1900.

While the legislatures of many States have been besieged for appropriations for the new system of popular education, only those mentioned have given money directly for books. The failure to get aid in other States has not stayed the rapid progress of the movement. It has probably helped it. In 1896 Hon. J. H. Stout of Menomonie, Wis., concluded to found a system of traveling libraries in his home county. He secured the assistance of the Wisconsin Free Library Commission, which had recently been established, in the labor of organizing the libraries and putting them at work. He soon had thirty-seven small libraries stationed in different parts of a county whose total population, outside of his home city, was 16,000. His experiment was so

strikingly successful that it inspired imitation, first in his own State and then in other States. Where individuals were unable to take up this work, associations were formed to do for limited areas what state aid had done for commonwealths. Schools, women's clubs, and various philanthropic organizations found the means to provide libraries for special purposes. In May, 1899, there were about 2500 traveling libraries, containing about 115,000 volumes, scattered in thirty States. About 1100 of these were equipped and maintained by state aid. Two hundred and fifteen of the remainder, those in Wisconsin, were bought with money given by individuals or associations, but were generally purchased, arranged, and supervised by a State Library Commission. The remainder were purchased and managed by private individuals or asssociations.

The ease with which the new plan of library extension may be adapted to meet various needs may be shown in a rapid summary of the work done by a few systems of traveling libraries. Some women in New Jersey have used them to lighten the long winter days and evenings of the brave men who belong to the life-saving service, and that State has now taken up the traveling library as a definite part of the work of its State Library; other women, in Salt Lake City, send them regularly to remote valleys in Utah; a number of state federations of women's clubs use them to furnish books for study to isolated clubs; Mrs. Eugene B. Heard of Middleton, Ga., is devoting herself to the supervision of an admirable system which reaches a large number of small villages on the Seaboard Air Line in five Southern States; an association in Washington, D. C., puts libraries on the canal-boats which ply on the Washington and Potomac Canal in the summer and "tie up" in small hamlets in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the winter; the colored graduates of Hampton Institute carry libraries to the schools for their own people at the base of the Cumberland Mountains, while to the "mountain whites" libra-

ries are sent by women's clubs in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama. In Idaho, California, Nebraska, Kansas, Illinois, Missouri, Minnesota, and many other States, women's clubs are doing the same work for miners, lumbermen, farmers, and sailors. The people of British Columbia and New Zealand are successfully imitating their American cousins in this work. In Massachusetts, where nearly every community has its public library, the Woman's Educational Association is doing a most helpful work by using traveling libraries to strengthen the weak public libraries in the hill towns.

The blessings resulting from the use of the traveling libraries have been so great and the expense so small comparatively that the movement has won friends and sympathy in a wonderful manner. Enthusiasm for the work has seemed to kindle at a touch, and the pioneers have often been overwhelmed with calls for advice and information.

There is no need now to tell in detail of the instances where individual, family, and community life has been brightened and quickened by the wholesome and entertaining books that have found their way to sordid homes and isolated hamlets. Even in great cities like Philadelphia the new system has forced good books through new channels into places where they had been rarely used.

It needs no argument to prove that no small collection of books for temporary service can be as helpful to a community as a permanent public library, and that a traveling library which educates a people to desire and support a good permanent library has fulfilled its highest purpose. It is also evident that some isolated communities cannot or will not support adequate home libraries, and must depend upon traveling libraries almost entirely for their reading. There will also be a permanent need for traveling libraries in supplementing the scant collections of the smaller libraries and in supplying the temporary needs of isolated study clubs. A special library on American history with a suggestive

outline may incite careful study in a score of villages before its brief life is ended, when the meagre local opportunities would discourage students.

As to the first and most important result to be secured through traveling libraries, experience seems to prove that those managed by state commissions lead more surely and quickly to the establishment of public libraries than those managed by associations. In New York a large number of public libraries have sprung up in communities which were first supplied by traveling libraries. In Wisconsin the smaller libraries have brought about the founding of twenty local libraries in small villages during the past two years.

State commissions have succeeded better than private associations in establishing permanent libraries because they work largely to that end and can offer more effective assistance in organizing new libraries. They put their traveling libraries more generally in the villages, while the sympathy of the women's clubs is more often aroused by the needs of the women and children on the farms. The commissions have at their command the library experience of the world, their books are better adapted to their purposes, their loan systems are more practical and business-like, they do more to communicate the "library spirit" to the librarians and managers of the little libraries, and they can better care for the books when returned to the central station. In a word, they make the management of traveling libraries a business. The systems of traveling libraries supported by associations have done work of this kind when the details of their management have been intrusted to librarians.

A description of a method used in Wisconsin to secure the founding of public libraries may be of interest here. It is not described because it is more successful than methods used elsewhere, but because the facts are better known to the writer. In January, 1898, only three villages in Wisconsin of less than 1500 inhabitants had free libraries sup-

ported by public tax. Early in that year the state commission secured from generous citizens the money to buy twenty traveling libraries for villages. These were made up largely of comparatively recent books. The commission then proposed to the village boards in as many villages to send them traveling libraries of fifty volumes each every six months if they would establish local public libraries under the state law, make suitable annual appropriations, and conduct them in a satisfactory manner. The commission also offered to aid in the organization of the local libraries. Since the offer was made twenty village libraries have been founded because of it. In nearly every case the commission has practically selected the books and decided the rules under which the library shall be conducted. All are succeeding and many of them are doing such good work as to surprise their most sanguine friends. In one case the establishment of the library brought private gifts of $7700, and in another case, in a village of less than 500 inhabitants, the appropriation and gifts for the first year amounted to $1050.

While associations have not been as successful as organizations supported by the State in securing the establishment of permanent libraries, they have been very successful in other important fields where those who give and those who receive can meet. It is clear that our city and village libraries should be free to neighboring farmers, but the farmers do not generally appreciate the value of the libraries, and are unwilling to bear a fair share of the burden of supporting them. There is no better way of educating them than to supply them from traveling libraries furnished by private associations working from a central library. Associations, like women's clubs and organizations of normal school students, have done so much good with traveling libraries, when they have managed them wisely, that it seems best to state the conditions necessary to succeed, frankly, and in some detail.

Traveling libraries must have books that will interest the people whom they are intended to benefit; they must be put in the right places, in charge of the right people, and they must be carefully supervised. The most needy places must have carefully chosen books. An habitual reader will read any respectable book rather than be idle, but the range of books that will hold untrained readers is very limited. Libraries made up of gifts from private libraries have rarely been permanently successful. The people who have tried to lay up treasures in heaven by contributing old books to traveling libraries have often injured a most worthy cause.

Libraries in country communities should be in homes or public places where people feel free to go. If the books are to help the families that need them most, they must be in charge of people who seek every opportunity to reach such families. It frequently happens that librarians who mean well weary in well doing. They need the encouragement of occasional visits from enthusiastic leaders. If personal visits are not practicable, they should receive frequent letters. Above all they need the stimulus of a hearty appreciation of their work, for their work is often trying. All this means that some one shall give the time for careful supervision. When a library has done its work at Station A, it should be examined and, if necessary, the books should be cleaned and mended before it is sent to Station B. If the books have been well cared for, the librarian and the patrons should be thanked. If they have been carelessly used, a very carefully worded statement of the fact should go with the next library.

The charging system should be as simple as possible. The librarians are unpaid, and all labor that can be saved them should be done at the central station.

In selecting, classifying, and preparing the books, in examining and mending them, the work will ordinarily be better done if it is under the charge of a trained librarian,